

Migrant Youth: From Integration to Transculturalism

With its ageing population, Europe needs to admit the importance of young migrants to its economy and to fully support their integration into European society.

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Age, migration and Europe: A reality to be taken into account

Europe is currently facing important demographic changes. The percentage of young people within European societies is decreasing sharply, and this will have extremely important consequences for the European social model, particularly in the areas of welfare, education and employment. Current birth rates in Europe are not sufficient to allow the population to renew itself. Between 2005 and 2030, the working age population (15 to 64) is projected to fall by 20.8 million. Moreover, the demographic dependency ratio, defined as the ratio of the population dependent population (aged 0 to 14 and over 65) to the non-dependent population (aged between 15 and 64 years), will rise from a rate of 49:51 (i.e., 49% of the population dependent) in 2005 to 66:34 (66% of the population dependent) in 2030 (EYF, 2008a; EYF, 2008b).

On the other hand, young people represent an important percentage of migrant communities, whose higher fertility rates are already benefiting European demographics. Indeed, according to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), young people historically make up a large share of the migrant population. If the definition of youth includes young people up to the age of 29², young people represent half of global migrant flows (UNFPA, 2006). The population in Europe will slightly increase until 2050 due to net immigration flows. Without immigration, the European population would have already started to decline (EC, 2005).

¹ The European Youth Forum (EYF) is an independent, democratic, youth-led platform representing 99 National Youth Councils and International Youth Organisations from across Europe: 38 National Youth Councils and 61 International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations, which are federations of youth organisations in themselves. The EYF works to empower young people to participate actively in society to improve their own lives by representing and advocating for their needs and interests and those of their organisations towards the European institutions, the Council of Europe and the United Nations. Representation, internal democracy, independence, openness and inclusion are among the main principles for the functioning of the EYF and its member organisations.

² As is the case in the UNFPA report; however, the European Youth Forum considers a person to be young up to 35 years of age.

Despite these statistics, the youth perspective is rarely considered in national and international debate on migration. A further understanding of the needs of young migrants is needed and the important role played by young migrants in European society should be acknowledged.

Unacceptable double standards: Incentives and disincentives for young migrants

There are many points of view from which the relationship between migration and youth can be framed within the European context. The current European policies frame migration within the Lisbon Growth and Jobs Strategy, focusing on the need to effectively tackle demographic changes in order to ensure growth.

Many provisions have been introduced in key areas such as employment and education to maximise economic growth, implying the need for Europe to be the most competitive and knowledge-based economy. These provisions have a crucial impact on the lives of young migrants.

The European Union has put in place special conditions of entry and residence for third-country nationals for the purposes of highly qualified employment (EC, 2007), including a Blue Card permit system. The Blue Card scheme (which will come into force in 2011) is similar to the US Green Card system, but is only valid for two years, although renewable. Applicants must have a one-year EU job contract with a salary of at least three times the minimum wage. Blue Card holders are treated equally in relation to national workers, limited only in their access to education grants, housing and social assistance. The Blue Card system aims at attracting highly qualified workers by fast tracking procedures, eventually increasing mobility within the EU.

A Directive on the conditions of admission of third-country nationals for the purposes of education, school student exchange, unremunerated training or voluntary service was also adopted (2004/114/EC). In 2001, the first Erasmus Mundus programme, an EU cooperation and mobility programme in the field of higher education, was launched. The second phase of the programme for the period 2009 to 2013 is now being implemented.

Although these initiatives are important, they exclusively target elite migrants and contribute to establishing different categories of migrants, among which only some are identified as 'useful' in terms of economic growth. Furthermore, the needs of other categories of migrants are not taken into account.

For instance, the European Union has introduced a Directive on Family Reunification of Third-Country Nationals (Directive 2003/86/EC), which hints at a toughening of the conditions for reunification and leaves a significant part of sovereignty to the Member States. Some countries have begun to fear abuse of family reunification procedures and have passed bills that have been highly controversial, and perhaps even discriminatory and in contravention of the Geneva Convention of 12 August 1949. Such moves could result in an increase in the number of separated children and youth. This is even more significant considering the fact that family reunification is still the main reason to migrate in many EU countries (EYF, 2008b).

At this point, it should be mentioned that the Directive on Common Standards and Procedures in Member States for Returning Illegally Staying Third-Country Nationals (Return Directive 2008/115/EC) does take into account the specific situation of vulnerable groups, including minors, unaccompanied minors and single parents with minor children. Indeed, it ensures basic rights to them such as emergency health care, the essential treatment of illness and access to basic education. However, at the same time, the document sets out exceptions in relation to conditions of detention of third-country nationals during the period granted to them to voluntarily return to their countries of origin. In particular, the Directive allows for the detention of minors and families, although this should be a measure of last resort. The detention of migrant minors for reasons related to their residence status is at odds with international human rights standards.

The needs of young migrants are certainly not duly taken into account by such policies and legislation. Specific attention should be given to child and youth migrants regardless of the reason for their decision to migrate, their level of education, or their economic or other status. The European policies on migration, including the European Common Immigration Policy, draw from economic growth paradigms, overlaid by security, and establish a hierarchy among migrant groups. As a consequence, they ultimately strengthen prejudice and fail to acknowledge the tremendous benefits that young migrants bring to Europe, in addition to their contribution to European economic growth.

Difficulties experienced by migrant minors wishing to reunite with their families, detention conditions imposed on unaccompanied minors, degrading and humiliating detention conditions, and

discrimination experienced by young migrants in the field of employment, education, and access to health and social services are against international law standards and, sadly, undermine the credibility of a European Union claiming to be the stronghold of fundamental rights and freedoms.

Migration, cultural diversity and youth

The link between migration and cultural diversity is one of the most exploited arguments and sources of controversy and debate. Although important, focusing exclusively on this link by identifying either the extraordinary added value brought to Europe by migration in terms of diversity, as many civil society organisations do, or the threat represented by non-European migrants, which is often the core message of populist political propaganda, corresponds to the same cultural model. Although apparently opposite points of view, both draw from the assumption that Europe is not a diverse society and from the dichotomy of 'us' and 'them', which, even though applied on the larger European scale, is typical of the discourses developed in the context of nation states.

However, young people represent an extremely diverse group of people, cultural diversity being only one aspect of their diversity. Young people hold a wide range of political views, enjoy different cultural activities, belong to groups expressing different trends, believe in different Gods or are atheist, have same sex partners or different sex partners, and have different ethnic origins, among other things. Young Europeans already belong to different cultural traditions, which may play an important role in shaping their ways of being, or not. In this sense, the weight given to cultural differences needs to be downsized.

Migrant youth bring additional value to European diversity. This being said, the risk of identifying them as a homogeneous group should be avoided as this is at odds with the concept of diversity itself. In this sense, although young migrants surely share many similar experiences because of their migrant status, they are and should be considered a diverse group, rather than a homogeneous entity where migrant status is the predominant defining feature.

Young migrants are a resource for European societies, although everyone, including the migrants, bears an enormous responsibility for ensuring that their full potential is developed. Indeed, the role of young migrants in society has to be framed within the existing patterns related to the participation and contribution of young people to society. Young people are indeed a major source of social change; they are the ones actively promoting improvements and holding ideals, and they have the energy and commitment to redress injustice. Young migrants could also bring about positive change, but they often experience difficulties compared to their European peers. In this respect, although other groups of young Europeans are surely subjected to social

and economic distress, young migrants bear the existing inequalities at the global level, for which Europe is partially responsible. In addition, they are not protected from discrimination on the grounds of nationality and/or migrant status³, and they experience prejudice because of both their age and their migrant status.

Ensuring the participation and integration of young migrants within European societies has a lot in common with the challenge of ensuring the participation and integration of young people in general, although characterised by additional and specific difficulties. The successful integration of young migrants is often hindered by restrictions in the fields of education and employment, even when holding a long-term residence permit, by difficulties in contributing to political life, by long and bureaucratic procedures to access nationality, by a lack of legal protection against discrimination, and so forth. Practices established in these key areas of life differ greatly from one country to another, but the overall picture is not very encouraging. Only a few countries have adopted and implemented policies on the aforementioned areas that are favourable to the integration of migrants (Niessen et al., 2007).

The integration of young migrants should ideally contribute to breaking down cultural barriers and, ultimately, to changing the very predominance of the existing cultural discourse, which considers cultural differences as the most difficult differences to cope with. For this to happen, we need to reflect on current European policies and on the responsibility of both national governments and European institutions to ensure the effective integration of migrants and young migrants into society. This implies the existence of legislation and policies ensuring equal opportunities for young migrants, as well as special actions aimed at promoting their capacity to take decisions autonomously, enabling them to think critically, and providing them with the whole set of opportunities to allow them to actively contribute to civil and political life. At the same time, a reflection needs to be stimulated and developed with and within migrant communities themselves to promote mutual understanding, avoid any manipulation of presumed cultural differences, and to question ties and allegiances based on stereotypes and nationalism.

The way forward: Involving young migrants in shaping their own future

The process leading from integration to transculturalism, implying, as explained above, a downsizing of the cultural component, is certainly a difficult one. However, this process could represent an alternative

to the current intercultural and multicultural models, which do not take a genuine stand against the opposition of cultures, and to the model of diversity based on collective rather than individual features.

Towards this aim, the move from integration to transculturalism should not take place without the active involvement of young migrants. Education plays a major role in promoting new visions and new patterns of integration coming from the migrant communities themselves. In this respect, both formal and non-formal education can provide further occasion for young migrants to reflect upon their own future and their role within European societies. This reflection should be developed jointly with their non-migrant peers and should allow young Europeans to frame European issues in the context of a globalised world, where European realities are intertwined with global dynamics, migration being one of them. Such a process requires formal and non-formal education actors to have a better capacity to reach out to young migrants and to provide them with the space they need to develop their full autonomy.

Civil society organisations as well as the media bear an enormous responsibility to ensure government accountability for the need to promote the integration of young migrants and to provide further and alternative ways to participate and for individual development. The European standards on political participation (Council of Europe, 1992) should be effectively implemented, while at the same time supporting other forms of participation. Participation in civil society, volunteering and engagement in awareness-raising activities need to be adequately stimulated.

Towards this, the European Youth Forum believes that youth organisations must play an important role in integrating migrants and building a transcultural society. The structure of democratic youth organisations gives young people the possibility to experience and learn about the principles of participative democracy and active citizenship.

The inclusion of migrant organisations in existing youth organisation networks, and the exchange of both experiences and resources, can benefit the development and empowerment of migrant organisations – empowering individual migrant youth.

Conclusion

The youth perspective needs to be further taken into account when designing and implementing policies on migration. Statistics show that the link between age and migration is a crucial one and cannot be overlooked anymore. Young migrants and young non-migrants face many similar challenges and encounter many barriers in attempting to become autonomous and to fully participate in society. Therefore, joint efforts and actions should be undertaken by both youth organisations and migrant organisations in order to effectively tackle these challenges.

Institutional stakeholders have a duty to design

³ The European antidiscrimination law does not provide any protection against discrimination on the grounds of nationality and migrant status. It provides protection against discrimination based on age only in the field of employment and occupation (Directive 2000/78/EC).

and implement migration policies embedding human rights and fundamental freedoms. Towards this aim, the human rights of migrants, including the most vulnerable groups within them, such as minors, young migrants and asylum seekers, need to be respected, regardless of their migrant status; this principle should be the cornerstone for decision makers when tackling migration issues.

Finally, integration requires considerable effort in terms of raising awareness, changing cultural patterns and promoting a genuine model of diversity where individuals no longer need to strongly belong to ethnically-based communities in order to advocate for their rights. In a context where multiple identities are recognised, the importance of the cultural component will be diminished and the discourse around integration will no longer be organised around cultural cleavages. In this post-integration reality, young migrants and migrants in general will be considered simply as individuals, despite migrant status and ethnic origin, living within political entities that do necessarily need to be based on nations and nationalities to exist. ■

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